

Whitehouse paper cuts Gordian knot

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My primary professional field is not nature conservation, and my comments do not therefore relate to the detailed technicalities of this paper. Rather I am commenting as someone who needs a sustainable, cogent rationale for making practical decisions in this area.

In New South Wales the neglect of a rigorous examination of the rationale for nature conservation has, as the author points out, bedevilled policy makers and field personnel alike. In this paper the author clearly reviews the historic and current arguments, and in my view leads us to a logical conclusion which cuts the Gordian knot and provides a direction which should allow real progress in this area. This paper is an important contribution to the debate and its solution, although there are still some key, unanswered questions.

A key point in the paper rests on the distinction between genetic and ecological diversity. Because of the importance of this point, and because of my unfamiliarity

with the area generally, a clearer explanation of these two approaches, and the implications of their application in the field, is necessary to make the arguments more easily accessible to the lay reader and to many in the public policy area who lack expertise in the subject.

This paper is an ideal jumping off point for the examination of a series of consequent questions and problems. Firstly, there is the question, briefly referred to by the author, of fauna conservation. The author's definition of this problem is spot on — and it appears to me that it needs addressing as a crucial next stage in the development of a nature conservation strategy. Secondly of course are the implications, for a viable nature strategy, of the rapidly diminishing opportunities for new reserve creation. Can a strategy which even approaches the aims outlined in this paper now be devised, or will the combination of historic habitat destruction and present land use and development patterns deal a final blow to any reserve policy?

Response to: Conserving What?—The basis for nature conservation reserves in New South Wales 1967-1989

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The article is most interesting as a review by J. F. Whitehouse as he perceives the forces behind the process that has finally resulted in the existing system of nature conservation reserves in New South Wales. Whitehouse has the disadvantage of not having experienced the long and tedious pathway that community organizations had to follow in order to cut through bureaucratic opposition to secure the establishment of the *National Parks & Wildlife Service*. It would seem that he has largely opted for the period since the *Service* derived powers from the *National Parks & Wildlife Act* of 1967.

Writing as one who has been heavily involved in the nature conservation movement since the late 1930s (and to some extent, having had the opportunity to know those who laboured even from the beginning of the 1900s), I have to say that if the prime objective of nature conservation is to conserve the diversity of the biomass, the *Service* has failed, during its twenty-two years

lifetime, to catch up with the deficiencies in the nature reserve system as it enters the critical period to guarantee the prospect of meeting the needs of the biota beyond 2000. As only time will tell, I for one, will not be alive to meet the challenge of my prediction.

There are of course, many reasons for the failure and Whitehouse has referred to some of them, but not all. In my opinion, not to the most significant.

It is very true indeed, that nature conservation has been seen to be dependent upon the establishment of reserves held in public ownership, and as Whitehouse clearly shows, not selected specifically for the contained natural systems, but for several reasons of which recreation in the bush, or beside the sea, or whatever, readily took dominance. In this respect, committed individuals and organizations, amongst them the bushwalkers, dominated the concept of nature conservation as preserving the bush because it gave much pleasure in

return. Selection of reserves on the basis of sampling of biotic communities could not have been further from their thinking. Indeed, one could well say that many protagonists of national parks in the past and today, had and have little knowledge and/or concern for the burden of Whitehouse's case for the sampling of natural systems.

Not that authority would have tolerated "locking up" large areas of public lands away from development on the esoteric grounds of sampling natural systems. As today, the value of national parks as an attraction for tourism, so too in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, the value of reservation was to be measured in monetary return.

That very position is what makes the *Fauna Protection Act of 1948* such an extraordinary piece of legislation. It strongly made the point that there should be dedication of lands for the purpose of ensuring the survival of species...in other words, an ecological approach to wildlife conservation. When in 1949, the *Fauna Protection Panel* set to work to establish (as it was required to do) a system of *faunal reserves* (later to become the present *nature reserves*), the procedure of sampling natural systems was determined.

Another major feature of the *Fauna Protection Act* was the direction to sponsor programmes of education, directly by the wildlife conservation authority itself as well as through the promotion of community bodies, aimed at observing and appreciating the interrelatedness of ecosystems.

Unlike the *National Parks & Wildlife Service*, the work of the *Fauna Protection Panel* began from a very unloved floor level. The staff was made up of the Chairman of the Panel (a permanent officer known as the *Chief Guardian of Fauna*) and one office assistant. It took some three years to secure the services of the first Field Officer, but by the time the wildlife service was high-jacked by the Minister for Lands in 1966, its influence in nature conservation was well established and equipped with a staff of some 25, most of them operating in the field.

Like the far more prestigious *National Parks & Wildlife Service* (only more so) the wildlife service of the 1950s was soon to discover that it would have to hack its system of nature reserves out of what remained after some 175 years of land settlement, alienation and land-use in the State of New South Wales. If the *National Parks & Wildlife Service* has found opposition to the attempts to expand its estate from 1967 onwards, perhaps it will be clear just how much frustration was experienced in the 1950s and 60s by the *Fauna Panel*.

The faunal reserve system which the wildlife service was directed to establish through the provisions of the *Fauna Protection Act*, had to come from what remained of the vacant Crown land and only with the approval of the Minister for Lands. Come what may, the *Fauna Panel* was reduced to accepting or rejecting whatever the Department of Lands cared to offer. Planning a system of reserves based on sampling of natural systems was made to appear to be largely a matter of nonsense as both the Department of Lands and the Western Lands Commission were very ready to so inform the *Panel*. In fact, despite the careful fieldwork carried out to determine sampling against a reference code of vegetative types, the Department of Lands sent out its own "expert" officers who frequently advised the *Panel* that there was no fauna worth preserving on the site. The Western Lands Commission was even more determined by bluntly advising on many occasions that the *Panel* would do well to go away and hide.

The *Fauna Panel* early in its career decided that the name "faunal reserve" was a misnomer since sampling the natural systems involved both physical and biological factors. The problem was to relate the various categories of associations with whatever Crown lands may be available. Both the Department of Lands and the Western Lands Commission refused to co-operate in supplying information on where the vacant Crown lands were or where leases might be available for consideration. It is to the everlasting and unrecorded credit of a small band of Panel Field Officers and some members of community organizations, that by about 1964/5, the *Panel* did have a comprehensive list of available Crown land and Crown leases and these were being methodically studied in the field and classified according to the plant associations format which had been developed. By 1966 there were over 125 submissions for nature reserves based on these systems, before the Department of Lands and the Western Lands Commission.

By 1966, the preparation of a National Parks Act was well under way.

As Whitehouse remarks, the concept of a national park had already been established by the community as some kind of playground which was largely based on the manner in which the Department of Lands had been directing management, the endeavours of individuals, bushwalkers, and the Trusts which had been established to manage the parks. Tom Lewis saw the National Parks of the United States as the symbol to follow. This led to the importation of Sam Weems, a retired officer of the US National Parks Service as an adviser and then as the first *Director of National Parks & Wildlife*. Add to this the outlook of Howard Stanley who had been running the embryo national parks service within the Department

of Lands for a couple of year and it is not difficult to understand why the "parks for the people" theme was dominant.

The tragedy seemed to me to be that in 1966 the endeavours of the *Fauna Panel* to set up a system of nature reserves based on the very factors which Whitehouse has underlined in his paper, were disregarded, under-written and indeed, forgotten and destroyed. The endeavours would have to start again; and that seems to be obvious from what Whitehouse says in his article.

The wildlife service of the 1950s and 60s was indeed "lumped" into a national parks service and in the opinion of this writer the nature conservation reserves systems of New South Wales are very much the poorer by that stupid and I believe, vindictive act, since the earlier wildlife service was on the brink of bringing to fruition many of those very achievements which Whitehouse sees as being the challenges of the 1990s, 25 years down the track.

It was by sheer good fortune that the name *Nature Reserve* and its purpose survived in 1967. For what it is worth, I should mention that it was the intention of the

Fauna Protection Panel to establish a System of Nature Reserves based on the concepts and practices used in the nature reserves of England and Scotland at that time. In our opinion, the wildlife service had a distinct function from the national parks service, and whilst they might be brought together in a Commission or an Authority, the two services needed to be sufficiently discrete to ensure the separate and proper functioning of the two aspects of nature conservation. The wildlife service of course, had functions beyond that of an estate and planned to promote nature conservation in multiple landuse programmes, an aspect that is singularly absent from the current management. Since it is most unlikely that the combined estate of national parks and nature reserves will provide for sampling of all natural systems, management of natural systems outside the parks and reserves offered some hope of making up for some of the deficiencies we contemplated.

The *Fauna Panel* had no doubts about what it wanted to conserve and how it wanted to do it. The remarkable and unacknowledged fact is the parallelism with what Whitehouse is saying in 1990... only we said it in the 1950s and 60s.

The Future of Nature Conservation Reserve Establishment Programmes

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of my recent paper entitled "Conserving What? The Basis of Nature Conservation Reserves in New South Wales 1967-1989" (Whitehouse 1990) was to promote a more searching debate on the range of options and choices in defining the basis of nature conservation reserve establishment programmes. The growth of literature in the field of conservation biology in the last decade has greatly assisted in providing a more rigorous and scientific framework for conservation decisions. Yet much of that literature has neglected the important strategic choices involved in determining the directions of nature conservation reserve establishment and the opportunity costs associated with those choices. In seeking to promote debate on the objectives of a nature conservation programme, a brief historical review was undertaken to identify instances where attempts were made to provide an explicit statement of the underlying rationale of the directions of the nature conservation reserve programme. Some of the broad choices of driving forces were identified and a preference was indicated for a nature conservation reserve programme

which accorded priority to the conservation of ecological diversity.

Comments on this paper are presented from Adam, Burgin, Benson, Johnstone, Mason, McMichael, Pressey, Recher, Reed, Specht, Starling, Strom and Sullivan. Each of these comments provides important insights into the debate on future directions for nature conservation reserves. The comments are particularly valuable as they come from a diverse range of people: ecologists, botanists, park managers, conservation activists and conservation administrators.

The Context of Reserves

It should, however, be emphasized that the fundamental purpose of my paper was to promote debate on the underlying basis of nature conservation reserve establishment programmes. It was not an attempt to provide a history of the National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales, nor even a history of the growth of the parks and reserves estate in New South Wales. Rather utilizing aspects of the history of the National Parks and